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# Climbing *the Ladder*

**OKWY IROGBU** says that the vital contribution of decentralising energy production and developing renewable sources to fight poverty has yet to be realised

**E**nergy, it is increasingly agreed, is central to reducing poverty and hunger, as well as to improving infrastructure and other development indices. It is also essential for enhancing the lives of women and children, who spend long hours — better spent in productive activities— in search of firewood or dung, a practice that leads to deforestation.

## Rural exodus

An estimated 1.6 billion people — about a quarter of humanity—have no access to electricity, and 2.4 billion rely on charcoal, dung or wood as the principal sources of energy for cooking and heating. The smoke from

these traditional fuels kills about two and half million women and children a year — a conservative estimate as few poor countries in sub-Saharan Africa have good statistics.

The cost of getting energy to the world's poor is not high. Lighting up the homes of 1.6 billion people with clean sustainable energy is estimated to cost about \$9 billion a year for ten years — a far cry from the \$250 and \$300 billion a year spent on subsidising fossil fuels and nuclear power.

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United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan says that energy poverty is seriously impeding socio-economic development, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. In Nigeria, — a country of over 120 million people — for example, there is a massive rural exodus as the poor migrate to the urban centers to look for alternative means of livelihood. They leave partly because the rural areas have little access to modern sources of energy supply, but their arrival in the bursting cities puts pressure on energy supplies in them, too. ▶



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Nigeria recently has been going through many reforms in an attempt to restructure the nation's monopoly energy supply into different companies to increase efficiency. But the country is still on the lowest rung of the energy ladder, with most of its people living on less than one dollar a day.

### **Economic growth**

The country's President, Olusegun Obasanjo, has attributed the nation's low economic ranking to its inability to achieve and sustain economic growth rates commensurate with its rich resource potentials, especially in sustainable energy. He has said: "Nigeria is blessed with enormous agricultural potentials, a vast array of mineral resources with a very clement weather condition, therefore it does not deserve to be listed as a poor nation." He emphasised that its epileptic energy supply was among the reasons for its sub-optimal level of development, and stressed that erratic and unreliable power supplies have been one of his major headaches. The average electricity supply in major urban centres lasts for just eight to ten hours a day.

### **Concerted efforts**

The President has set up a Power Regulatory Commission, and approved a new electricity law. A 500 kilometre gas pipeline is to be built, at a cost of \$1

billion to help to boost electricity capacity to 10,000 megawatts by 2007. It is commendable, but still a long way from meeting the nation's needs. Concerted efforts should be put into tapping gas, which is at present flared unchecked; one major oil company has already invested in this.

Companies and entrepreneurs have been put out of business as a result of the prohibitive cost of providing their own energy for their cottage industries. Yet there is potentially a huge market for renewable and sustainable sources of energy, both at home and for export, though — as in many other countries — they have not made appreciable progress.

### **Renewable sources**

Developing countries should both explore the possibilities of relevant and accessible renewable sources and adopt homegrown policies of energy decentralization in the way that Brazil, for example, is working in top gear to develop plant-based biofuels. The international community, for its part, should help developing economies in their fight against poverty by encouraging energy providers to help create and support sustainable energy markets in the developing world — and target aid to these areas so as to meet the Millennium Development Goals ■

*Okwy Iroegbu is Head of the Environment/Property Desk, NewAge Newspapers, Lagos, Nigeria.*